Making Electronic Devices Work for Your Family
by Ann Skoczenski, PhD, Program Manager, Center for Faculty Development

iPads. Smart phones. Nintendo 3DS. Tablets. The ubiquity of electronic devices means that all families are trying to navigate rules and expectations for their use. Yes, there can be a lot of educational value in these devices, but there is also a lot of addictive power in their use, not to mention constantly evolving ways to use them for social interactions and sadly, bullying.

The MGH Faculty Parents Group recently had two sessions to address these topics. In the first, David Bickham, PhD, of the Center on Media and Child Health, Children's Hospital Boston, discussed "Media and Our Children." This talk focused on helping children develop healthy tv viewing habits, and internet safety (see resources, below).

In a follow up session, two of our parents, Ann Skoczenski, PhD, program manager in the Office for Women's Careers and Helen Delichatsios, MD, a primary care physician here at MGH facilitated a discussion on, "Making electronic devices work for your family." The facilitators and the attendees (parents of children with a wide range of ages, from infants to teenagers) shared what has worked for them, and commiserated on the complexity of allowing our kids to use these devices.

Here is a brief summary of advice and issues that were discussed for different age groups.

Toddlers – early elementary: For this age, the biggest challenge seems to be how to set screen limits, and most parents of young children questioned the ideal amount of time that kids should be allowed to access electronic devices. The general consensus was that most parents use their phones and tablets for short periods as a 'babysitter' (e.g. while cooking dinner, standing in a long line, taking a call from a patient), and most were comfortable with this in moderation. But there was agreement that we need to focus our youngest children on real-life social interactions, and everyone noted the need to avoid using our devices ourselves during family time.

Later elementary: This age sees a great increase in the amount of time that children (especially boys) spend playing video games. In middle childhood, access to video games seems to play a huge role in peer interactions. This is a time to pay close attention to the content of the games. Some are fun, others are just silly, but some are downright violent and misogynistic. Another hallmark of this age is that children are spending more independent time with devices, so we need to teach them internet safety rules, and set clear limits on their use (beware of "in-app purchases!").

Middle school and older: Most children of parents in the group got their first cell phone at the beginning of middle school, and this is where things get really tricky in terms of monitoring kids' use and protecting them (from themselves as well as others). The number of apps that kids use to connect with each other and post photos is constantly growing and changing. A whole book could be devoted to this, but the main points that were discussed were: the need to have an ongoing discussion about protecting your online reputation and the permanence of internet posts; and the need for parents to devote time to staying on top of their children's smartphone and online activity to watch out for bullying and inappropriate behavior.

Please see resources listed below for information and advice. We encourage you to share your own ideas on this topic by emailing womens.careers@partners.org. We may compile your ideas and comments for a future posting or invite you to write for the forum.

Resources:

Center on Media and Child Health, Children's Hospital Boston
http://www.cmch.tv/

Setting screen limits
http://www.commonsensemedia.org/advice-for-parents/dont-touch-dial-tips-limiting-screen-time

Reviews of movies, apps and games
http://www.commonsensemedia.org/reviews

Internet safety and cyberbullying
http://www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/parent-guide
 http://www.cnn.com/2013/02/27/health/cyberbullying-online-bully-victims
http://nyti.ms/163Jpfc

Kids and cell phones
https://www.lookout.com/resources/reports/smartphone-family-guide

Why your Snapchat isn't so secret
http://www.sfgate.com/technology/businessinsider/article/ALERT-Your-Secret-Snapchat-Relationships-4814597.php

Bringing Up Geeks: How to Protect Your Kid's Childhood in a Grow-Up-Too-Fast World
http://www.amazon.com/Bringing-Up-Geeks-Childhood-Grow-Up-Too-Fast/dp/0425221563